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SUBJECT: MEDELLIN GRAPPLES WITH POST-CONFLICT SECURITY
ISSUES

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
For reasons 1.4 B and D

¶1. (C) Summary: A 17% rise in murders in Medellin--after five consecutive years of decline--has aroused fears that security may be deteriorating. Local officials blame the increase on infighting between narcotraffickers seeking to fill the vacuum left by the extradition of crime boss Diego Murillo (Don Berna) to the United States. Mayor Salazar and local officials reviewed their program to combat the increase, including more police and social investment, but said corruption among the local military, prosecutors, and police hinders these efforts. Colombian National Police (CNP) Director Oscar Naranjo said the increased murders are disturbing, but noted that Medellin's murder rate remains well below that of 2003. He said Colombia's future challenges will mirror the issues Medellin faces today. Despite the paramilitary demobilization and a defeated FARC, continued narcotrafficking, organized crime, and weak state presence produce high levels of residual violence. Confronting these challenges will require revising the roles of the police and military, as well as more investment in the judiciary and social programs. End Summary

Rise in Murders Raises Questions about Medellin Miracle

¶2. (U) Murders in the city of Medellin in the first seven months of 2008 hit 403, up from 343 during the same period last year. The 17% increase follows five consecutive years of falling murders (from 1938 in 2003 to 605 in 2007), and has aroused fears that security in the city may be deteriorating. Local municipal, human rights and police officials attributed the five year decline to aggressive joint police/military operations which largely drove FARC and ELN militias out of the city, as well as the paramilitary demobilization and subsequent cooperation of the demobilized in maintaining order. They also noted the effects of greater social investment in Medellin's poorer neighborhoods, and improved policing techniques such as more community policing and better use of intelligence.

¶3. (C) Medellin Mayor Alonso Salazar and CNP Medellin Commander Dagoberto Garcia told us the current spike in homicides reflects infighting among narcotraffickers to fill the power vacuum left by the breakdown of Don Berna's criminal organization (known as the Oficina de Envigado or Los Paisas) after his extradition. The Oficina controlled crime in Medellin and the surrounding departments for years, making it the financial/operational hub for a regional illegal drug economy extending across Choco, Cordoba, Sucre, Antioquia, and parts of Bolivar departments. With Berna's extradition and the arrest of some of his key lieutenants such as Alirio Rendon (El Cebollero), new narcotraffickers like Daniel Rendon (Don Mario) from the Uraba region of

Antioquia are trying to gain control of the Oficina's criminal operations. Medellin Secretary of Government Jesus Ramirez said 70% of those murdered to date had prior criminal records. He noted that murders are also up sharply in Cordoba (153 to 281 during first six months of 2008) and Uraba (123 to 151 during the same period).

¶4. (C) In addition to outsiders, Garcia and Ramirez said the erosion of the Oficina's hold on crime in Medellin--which Garcia said began to weaken after Berna's incarceration in 2005--has prompted battles between local "combos" (neighborhood gangs with between 5-30 members which control retail drug distribution, extortion, etc). The CNP has identified over 150 "combos" in the city. Garcia said the 4700 demobilized paras in Medellin also generate crime. In the initial demobilization period, the municipality worked through Don Berna's command structure (maintained through the NGO Corporacion Democracia) to implement reintegration and keep order. This approach functioned relatively well into 2007, when it became clear that Berna's lieutenants were using the Corporacion to continue criminal activities. Don Mario and other outsiders have also recruited demobilized to build their structures in Medellin. 180 former paras have been murdered in Medellin to date, largely due to fighting among themselves.

Criminals or New Paramilitaries?

¶5. (C) Local UN High Commission on Human Rights (UNHCHR) representative Felipe Sanchez agreed that police successes against criminal leaders--and the ensuing battles for control among new narcotraffickers--are behind the upsurge in murders in Medellin, Cordoba, and the Uraba region of Antioquia. Still, he discounted human rights groups' claims that the violence reveals the continuation of former paramilitary structures. UNHCHR has done a detailed analysis of the new groups operating in Antioquia, Choco, and Cordoba and has found that they lack the military command structure, capacity to sustain prolonged military operations, and the counterinsurgency/political agenda that characterized the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Sanchez said each group's actions are directed toward purely criminal activities such as narcotrafficking, extortion, prostitution, illegal mining or logging, and other crimes. He added that the groups' lack of ideology and military firepower leads them to work with the FARC and ELN in many areas.

Local Authorities and CNP Response

¶6. (C) Salazar said the increased violence shows that local authorities can never take security for granted. Despite progress against criminal groups, narcotrafficking profits allow criminal organizations to regenerate quickly. Salazar said Medellin municipal officials are committed to working with the CNP to combat the current rise in homicides, noting that Medellin contributes more funding per capita to the local police than any other municipality in Colombia. These funds help the CNP to improve its communications equipment, mobility, and logistics, and also give municipal officials leverage over CNP strategy. Ramirez said he meets weekly with Garcia to discuss security issues, and is working with the CNP to develop more community policing and better intelligence techniques. Still, Salazar complained that due to national needs, there are fewer policemen in Medellin today than in 2004.

¶7. (C) Garcia said that in spite of the hike in murders, the overall crime rate in Medellin is down. In the first seven months of 2008, household burglaries fell 22%, while car theft dropped 14%. The CNP has set up a special anti-homicide unit, as well as a special interagency task force to investigate especially heinous crimes. In Medellin's poorer neighborhoods, the CNP has established special intervention groups to target the "combos." Garcia

said these actions are producing results. The CNP has arrested suspects in 40% of the murders committed so far this year, including 90 perpetrators caught in the act. Still, with only 5100 police in Medellin, a city of over two million inhabitants (and 7900 in the Metropolitan area which has over three million residents), winning the war against criminal groups remains difficult. CNP National Director Naranjo told us he plans to move his command post to Medellin for 2-3 days in the near future to give greater impetus to the local CNP's efforts.

Social Investment

18. (SBU) Salazar said the rise in murders stems more from organized crime than "social causes" such as unemployment, poverty or inequality. Still, he said the municipality will step up social spending, including infrastructure, over the next three years. Municipal Planning Director for previous Mayor Sergio Fajardo, Salazar's campaign manager, and current Medellin Public Enterprises director Federico Restrepo told us Medellin will invest approximately USD 6-6.5 billion in social investment during Salazar's tenure. These funds will extend the public transportation in poor neighborhoods, and will also pay for social programs such as scholarships targeting at-risk youth. He predicted the economic slowdown affecting Colombia would not cripple the city, noting that Medellin took steps to build its own revenue base during Fajardo's tenure. Unlike Cali which depends on national government transfers, Medellin generates 75% of its own resources, enabling it to fund substantial public works projects that should help it weather slower economic growth.

Local Corruption Hampers Anti-Crime Efforts

19. (C) Salazar said corruption within the local military, Prosecutor General's Office, and CNP remains an obstacle to combating crime. The July 17 murder of an Army Captain--the second in command of an Army anti-kidnapping unit (GAULA) in Antioquia--at a known criminal hangout and the subsequent cover up by the GAULA commander shows criminal penetration of the military. He claimed local military units in Medellin sell weapons to criminals and also run a group of 90 former paramilitaries who engage in a range of crimes. Similarly, the heads of the Prosecutor General's offices in Medellin and Cordoba--Guillermo Valencia Cossio and Perla Davila--are under investigation for alleged ties to Don Mario and former paramilitary groups. Former Medellin Police Chief Marco Pedreros is also under suspicion. Salazar said he has raised the corruption issues with Naranjo, who has sent outside investigators to help. Naranjo confirmed to us that he is following up on Salazar's corruption charges, noting that nine police have been detained for ties to criminal groups.

Medellin Grapples with Post-Conflict Security Challenges

110. (C) Naranjo told us the increase in homicides, while disturbing, should not be exaggerated. Even at the current rate, the number of homicides in Medellin in 2008 will be far below those earlier in the decade. Still, he said it is critical that Colombian authorities prevent a further deterioration in the city. Medellin is grappling with the same problems a post-conflict Colombia will face. With the elimination of the AUC and FARC as national security threats, Colombia will still have significant residual violence from criminal groups fueled by narcotrafficking profits, high poverty, and a weak or corrupt state presence in many areas. The challenge for Medellin, and Colombia, is to consolidate the successes against the FARC and AUC and prevent the emergence of new, national criminal structures. Naranjo said this will require a redefinition of the roles of the military and police, as well as greater investment in the judiciary, local institutions, and social projects.

